

Chapter 5

‘Mong’st the furies finde just recompence’:
Suicide and the Supernatural in William
Sampson’s *The Vow Breaker* (1636)

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Introduction

The prevailing view on suicide in early modern England was that it was absolutely ‘contrary to the *Lawes* and *ordinances* of God’,¹ and contemporary theologians including John Sym, William Willymat, Robert Hill and Richard Greenham expounded in sermons and treatises on the prohibitions against self-murder and the dire consequences attendant upon the soul of the deceased.² To take one’s own life indirectly challenged the authority of the Church, and suicide, in its violation of community values, also awakened fears of the supernatural and of what the condemned soul might be capable. On the popular stage, of course, dramatizations of suicide could provide shocking but arresting scenes of conflict, both on the personal level and within the affected community.

¹ John Sym, *Lifes Preservative Against Self-Killing*, 1673, ed. Michael MacDonald, Tavistock Classics in the History of Psychiatry (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 185.

² William Willymat, *Physicke, to Cure the Most Dangerous Disease of Desperation*, STC 25762 (London, 1605); Robert Hill, *A Direction to Die Well*, in *The Pathway to Prayer and Pietie*, 1613, The English Experience: Its Record in Early Printed Books Published in Facsimile 744 (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1975); Richard Greenham, *The Works of the Reverend and Faithfull Servant of Iesus Christ M. Richard Greenham, Minister and Preacher of the Word of God: Examined, Corrected, and Published, for the Further Building of all Such as Love the Trueth, and Desire to Know the Power of Godlines*, 1599, The English Experience: Its Record in Early Printed Books Published in Facsimile 524 (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1973).

William Sampson (b. 1599/1600, d. in or after 1655)³ features two related suicides in *The Vow Breaker. Or, the Faire Maide of Clifton* (1636).⁴ Little is known about Sampson, the *DNB* noting that his name first appears as co-author, with Gervase Markham, of the play *Herod and Antipater*, published in 1622. *The Vow Breaker* has two major plot strands: a representation of military–historic events during the Siege of Leith in Scotland in 1560, and the Young Bateman story, which had been popularized in various ballad versions and was well known in Nottingham where, according to the title page of the play, ‘it hath beene diuers times Acted by severall Companies with great applause’. While the play has not been lauded for its literary qualities, it is of interest to Shakespeare scholars for its clear debt to *Hamlet*, and to early modern studies for its curious depictions of suicide and its effects on the local community.

The first suicide in the play – that of Young Bateman – leads to the death of his former betrothed, Anne, whom he is unable to forgive for marrying another suitor. His decision to take his own life precipitates the spiritual corruption of his soul, so that he returns to Anne as an obsessive revenant intent upon claiming her from beyond the grave. More significantly, however, his spirit appears to acquire a supernatural power that actually enables him to achieve the imposition of his vengeful will upon Anne, and to ensure that she is punished by being denied any possibility of Christian redemption.

This essay discusses suicide as a violation of early modern prohibitions against self-killing; it also explores the dire consequences of breaking a sacred vow in a secular context. Anne’s betrayal of Young Bateman leads to his suicide – which

³ These dates are given by David Kathman in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Sampson is described in this entry as a playwright and poet; a manuscript poem entitled ‘Love’s Metamorphosis, or, Apollo and Daphne’ is ‘strongly influenced by Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*’.

⁴ William Sampson, *The Vow Breaker. Or, the Faire Maide of Clifton*, STC 21688 (London, 1636). Kathleen Tillotson points out that the story of Young Bateman appeared in various ballad versions and may have been based on a play, no longer extant, entitled *Black Batman of the North*; see Kathleen Tillotson, ‘William Sampson’s *Vow-Breaker* (1636) and the Lost Henslowe Play *Black Batman of the North*’, *Modern Language Review*, 35 (1940): p. 377. Of a mid-sixteenth-century version of the ballad entitled ‘A Warning for Maidens’, David Atkinson observes that the ‘final moral of the broadside is both an encouragement to maintain faith in love, and a more terrible warning of divine punishment for vow-breaking or perjury’: see David Atkinson, ‘Marriage and Retribution in “James Harris (The Daemon Lover)”’, *Folk Music Journal*, 5.5 (1989): pp. 599–600. For information on *Black Batman of the North*, see the Lost Plays Database, at: <http://www.lostplays.org>. See also Patricia A. Griffin, ‘A Critical Edition of William Sampson’s *The Vow Breaker* (1636)’, doctoral thesis (Sheffield Hallam University, 2009). Griffin’s edition includes detailed discussion of the folk story and ballad sources for the play, as well as the historical background to the parallel plot of the Siege of Leith, not discussed here.

endows him with supernatural agency – and this in turn permits him, paradoxically, to ensure her death and damnation. This sequence of spiritually charged events takes place, however, in a strangely secular context: Sampson depicts a community which not only seems unable to recognize suicidal impulses in the emotionally distraught, but which also demonstrates a curious lack of concern about the potential for supernatural disruption in the daily lives of its members.

The clergy of the Church of England strenuously condemned suicide as a crime more heinous even than murder. In a lengthy work on the subject, Sym observes that 'whatsoever is to be thought of the vile quality, and of the damnable deserts of *murder* in generall, is to be conceived to be due, and much worse, to *self-murder* in speciall', for 'if it be horrible to murder another man, it is much more odious to kill ones *selfe*'.⁵ From the perspective of the early modern Church, Young Bateman's soul is contaminated by his choice to commit suicide, and this appears – in the context of the play – to place him beyond God's forgiveness. Like Don Andrea in Thomas Kyd's (bap. 1558, d. 1594) *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587),⁶ after death he inhabits a pagan underworld from whence he can observe the living and manipulate events to his advantage; in this sense, Sampson's vengeful ghost is a type that may be traced back to Senecan tragedy. As Stephen Greenblatt observes, 'the predominant theatrical figures of the dead are spirits from the underworld who ... long to see the stage run with blood', yet these figures 'did not seem to arouse a specifically theological anxiety'.⁷ Considered as inseparable events, however, the suicides of Young Bateman and Anne are theologically problematic, for together they create an uneasy juxtaposition of Christian and pagan elements which not only challenges the clerical position on self-slaughter, but also raises complex questions about the fate of the suicidal soul and the nature of divine judgement.

Consequences of the Broken Vow

In Sampson's play, Young Bateman is betrothed to Anne, but leaves his community temporarily to distinguish himself through a period of military

⁵ Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, pp. 47–8.

⁶ Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, in *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Katharine Eisaman Maus, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Maus notes that while the play was originally written in 1587, it was 'presented in revival' in 1598–99, with the "additions" that have survived the 1602 quarto' (p. xxxvi).

⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 152–3.

service. The original contract of betrothal between the two lovers takes place when they are alone together. Young Bateman gives Anne a 'peece of gold ... to seale a knot / A jugall knot on Earth, to which high heaven / Now cryes *Amen*', and the two of them agree that 'When eyther of us breakes this sacred bond / Let us be made strange spectacles to the world / To heaven, and earth'.⁸ This exchange of vows is crucial to the play, for the agreement between the two lovers is legally binding. In the early seventeenth century two forms of spousals could be made, either *de praesenti* (mutual consent in the present) or *de futuro* (a promise to marry later).⁹ As David Atkinson points out, '[n]ot only could marriage by spousals quite legally be contracted entirely in secret, but such contracts were also considered binding in the sight of God'. For this reason, to violate a marriage vow 'was to invite divine punishment'.¹⁰

In the betrothal scene a form of sabotage already seems to be at work, for Young Bateman cannot resist cautioning Anne, before they part, 'If thou shouldst soile this whiteness with blacke deedes / Thinke what a monster thou wouldst make thy selfe'.¹¹ On one level, this may be read as Sampson simply over-emphasizing the point – with a similar lack of subtlety Young Bateman repeats the line, 'Alive or dead tis I that must enjoy thee', an unnecessary number of times – but while the warning functions to foreground the moral issue at stake, Young Bateman's admonitory tone also undermines the tenderness of the scene, making him appear, even at this stage, unnecessarily harsh toward Anne.

When Young Bateman leaves to fulfil his duties as a soldier, Anne's father, Boote, puts pressure on his daughter to accept another suitor – the wealthy but elderly German. From the first scene, Boote is established as something of a tyrant; he had been enraged when Young Bateman spent time with Anne, and once the young man is absent, Boote declares his 'designe' to unite his daughter with German.¹² Atkinson compares *The Vow Breaker* to George Wilkins's play *The Miserie of Enforced Marriage* (1606), and identifies the coerciveness of Anne's father as an essential element in English domestic tragedy; he argues that the effect of Boote's influence and Anne's betrayal of Young Bateman 'create a tension between parental pressure and personal responsibility, so that the issue of enforced marriage is depicted as being in part one for the individual

⁸ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Primus, sig. B4r.

⁹ Atkinson, 'Marriage and Retribution', p. 602.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Primus, sig. B4r.

¹² Ibid., sigs B1r, B3r.

conscience'.¹³ Anne's change in attitude towards marriage is largely attributable to her father's influence; to her cousin Ursula she dismisses her earlier attachment to Young Bateman as a childish infatuation and claims that 'Gold, like a second nature can elixate, / Make the deformed faire, the faire seeme foule'.¹⁴ Ursula is not convinced by this verbal alchemy, perhaps suspecting that Anne is merely parroting her father's arguments. German himself is not adversely implicated in influencing Anne's decision, as he tells her that he has no wish to break any pre-existing contract and even gives her the opportunity to extricate herself from their arrangement.¹⁵

Reassured before his departure by Anne's protestations of unshakeable love and fidelity, Young Bateman is devastated, upon his return, to discover that Anne has married German on that very day. The jilted lover's impending suicide is clearly anticipated, particularly as Anne's insensitivity to his emotional turmoil increases his sense of desperation. Both she and her father scoff at his distress, and Anne even suggests to Young Bateman that he might wait until German dies and she is again free: 'If you will be wise, and live one yeere a batchelour tis ten to one thats odds, I bury my husband, e're I weare out my wedding Ring ... And may I tell you if youle stay my husbands Funerall, / I'le promise you I'le mourne, and marry all in a month'.¹⁶ Significantly, and in contrast to the intimacy of the betrothal scene, Anne's callousness towards Young Bateman is exhibited in front of her father, suggesting the level of Boote's success in stifling Anne's feelings toward her former lover.

Young Bateman, deeply shaken, is provoked into an anguished response: 'Ah monstrous; she plaies with my disasters / As boyes with bubbles blowne up into aire, / You that have care of innocents be my guard / Least I commit some outrage on my selfe'.¹⁷ The expression of this suicidal impulse appeals to an unnamed but presumably supernatural entity, to intervene and prevent him from self-destruction. In the awkward exchange between Young Bateman and Anne, he reminds her no less than six times that he has 'not curs'd' her yet; this implies, perhaps, that it is his eventual, wilful curse that condemns Anne as much as the breaking of the vow itself. Young Bateman continues: 'Hold swelling heart, for thou art tumbling downe / A hill of desperation; darke thoughts / Assaults my

¹³ David Atkinson, 'Marriage Under Compulsion in English Renaissance Drama', *English Studies*, 6 (1986): p. 492.

¹⁴ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Primus, sig. C3r.

¹⁵ Ibid., sig. C3v.

¹⁶ Ibid., Actus Secundus, sig. D3v–D4r.

¹⁷ Ibid., sig. D4r.

goodnes ...'¹⁸ He takes his leave of Anne, clearly overwhelmed by emotion, but instead of seeking consolation in the company of others, he absents himself and continues to nurse his grievance.

Two scenes later, Young Bateman re-enters the stage with '*a halter about his necke*'.¹⁹ He makes a long speech prior to his suicide, explaining that 'life is too burthensome' and musing: 'It is my terror that I live to thinke / I beare a life that is offensive to me.'²⁰ In the next 24 lines he apostrophizes Death, branding him a '[p]ale' and 'cowardly monster', and lamenting that Death has failed to come and claim him, despite his longing to be taken. 'Come', he challenges, 'and affront me; fill thy unpauncht nerves / With my harts bloud; till with the overture / Thy never satisfied maw be sated.' He regrets aloud to Death that 'thou approachest none / But those that fly thee' and continues:

Tis said thou art not partiall, and dost winde
The Prince, the begger, and the potentate
All in one mould; but they doe falsifie
That say thou art so tiranously just,
For I have sought thee through the unpend groves,
The shady cells where melancholly walkes,
And eccho-like thou answerst me with Death,
But darst not show thy face ...²¹

Increasingly consumed by his thoughts, Young Bateman finds himself at Anne's house and sees 'just at her doore a fruitlesse Tree / That has in autumnne cast her leavy boughs / Sorry to show such fruit as she produces'.²² Young Bateman's focus immediately shifts to Anne, and he torments himself with the thought of his former beloved enjoying her wedding night:

The night seemes silent, sleepe charmes the house,
And now the periurd woman is a topping,
I'le clime as high as she, yet i'le not rest,
My airy ghoast shall find her where she lyes,
And to her face divulge her perjuries.²³

¹⁸ Ibid., sig. D4r–D4v.

¹⁹ Ibid., sig. E1v.

²⁰ Ibid., sig. E1v–E2r.

²¹ Ibid., sig. E2r.

²² Ibid., sig. E2r.

²³ Ibid., sig. E2r.

His resentment projected outward, Young Bateman visualizes himself as already dead, his ghost seeking out and confronting Anne. His final lines are in the form of couplets, marking a transition from the vulgarity of his previous lines to a more self-consciously poetic turn of phrase in readiness for death:

Night be auspicious, draw thy sable weedes,
For day-light is a sham'd of her blacke deeds
One twitch will do't, and then I shall be wed
As firme unto my grave, as to her bed.²⁴

His jeopardized soul seemingly forgotten now, Young Bateman is wholly possessed of the desire to inflict upon Anne a suffering equal to his own; the conflation of 'grave' and 'bed' represents Young Bateman's vision of a new contract with Anne, a grim and inescapable bond. On the dark stage, Young Bateman secures the rope, and the audience is obliged to witness his death as he '*Falls, hangs*'.²⁵

Young Bateman has sought death, wallowing in his misery and apparently disregarding the spiritual danger of entertaining suicidal thoughts. According to Sym, however, the severity of personal suffering does not mitigate divine judgement of intentional suicides, and he states unequivocally that '*all, and every of them that so murder themselves; are certainly, and infallibly damned soule and body for evermore without redemption*'.²⁶ As we will see later, Sym does actually permit some exceptions, but the crucial word here is 'intentional', and, despite Young Bateman voicing a concern that he might 'commit some outrage' upon himself, he does not actively seek counsel to deter himself from its enactment. Sym urges his readers to 'abhorre and reject all unnaturall *motions*, or resolutions of *self-murder*;' for one to 'entertaine the thoughts of his owne destruction' is like '*a viper conceiving and fomenting such an issue, as in the birth thereof destroyes the parent that gave it being*'. He warns, '*the thoughts of evill*, that a man doth at first but dally withall, and fearelesly beholds in his mind ... at length possesse him, and master him'.²⁷ Just as the act of murder is often perceived as the end product of a 'chain of sins', so is suicide the culmination of a deadly process:

... *self-murder* comes *ague-like*, by *fits* ... very few doe fall into that
horrible sinne to accomplish it upon themselves, but by *degrees*. For, no

²⁴ Ibid., sig. E2r–E2v.

²⁵ Ibid., sig. E2v.

²⁶ Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, pp. 291–2.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

man at an instant falls into the fowlest crimes in the highest degree; *but* by *meanes*, from step to step, as he is able to overcome the *opposition* of *reason* and *grace*, that stands in his way.²⁸

Although Young Bateman does not think along theological lines, the 'step to step' process outlined by Sym describes the way in which the disappointed lover moves towards the decision to take his own life.

Like Hieronimo discovering the body of Horatio in *The Spanish Tragedy*,²⁹ Old Bateman comes looking for his son; he remembers that Young Bateman 'oft would ... say / He woo'd her underneath a *Plume-Tree*, / And underneath that Tree he vow'd to sit, / And tell his sorrowes to the gummy boughes / Though she disdaind to here them.'³⁰ When he finds the body, he calls upon Anne and blames her for his son's death. Curiously, Old Bateman speaks in terms of a pagan afterlife rather than a Christian hell, suggesting to Anne that 'gentle *Charon* will assigne [Young Bateman] waffage' the next day, when she will have the opportunity to 'shed two teares, and one poore sigh'.³¹ That *Charon* is 'gentle' seems to indicate that, for his father, Young Bateman's posthumous fate is more comfortably imagined as a rite of passage, rather than evidence of eternal damnation.

Clerical Condemnation of Suicide

From the point of view of the Church, however, Young Bateman manifests sinfulness, lack of faith in God and possibly the influence of the Devil. The clergyman Robert Hill, in his 1613 treatise *A Direction to Die Well*, lists the weaknesses and erroneous assumptions implied by such a desperate act:

1. It argues madnesse for a man to lay violent hands vpon himselfe.
 2. Impatience, that he cannot wait the leisure of God.
 3. Cowardlinesse, that he wil not endure that which might be inflicted vpon him.
 4. Unthankfulnesse, not to preserue this Jewell which is bestowed vpon him.
- And in a word, such a practise causeth not onely the actors, but their actions, profession, posteritie, and Countrie to bee euill spoken of.³²

²⁸ Ibid., p. 261.

²⁹ Kyd, *Spanish Tragedy*, 2.4.63–95.

³⁰ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Secundus, sig. E2v.

³¹ Ibid., sig. E3r.

³² Hill, *Direction*, pp. 133–4.

In the context of Hill's arguments, Young Bateman's action is violent and emotionally excessive; he lacks the inner fortitude – or perhaps the emotional maturity – to realize that his devastation will ease as time passes. The clergyman William Willymat, in his 1604 treatise *Physicke to Cure the Most Dangerous Disease of Desperation*, warns against succumbing to 'wicked' despair, for he argues that the Devil will attack 'when man is at the weakest, and most unfit and unable to withstand him'.³³ Once the sinner has been diabolically possessed, Sym admonishes, he cannot 'make, or be at peace with *God*', because his crime is 'directly contrary to Gods will, and to his own salvation. *Neither* can any mans precedent *prayer* be effectuall with *God*, for to obtaine pardon of a vile enormous sin, that he desperatly and unresistably intends to perpetrate against the *will* of *God*'.³⁴

The vilification of suicides was reflected in the burial practices and superstitions associated with their bodies. Sym maintains that suicides 'kill themselves upon the same reasons that the *heathen* doe', so that 'in this point they have nothing of *Christians*, but the name, and otherwise are *heathens*; and in that respect are justly to be debarred *Christian burial*'.³⁵ In *The Book of Common Prayer*, the prayer book of the established Church, in the section entitled 'A Commination against sinners', the text is clear about the fate that awaits those who have 'despised the goodness, patience, and long sufferance of God':

Then shall they call upon mee (saith the Lorde) but I will not heare, they shall seeke mee earely, but they shall not finde mee, and that because they hated knowledge, and received not the feare of the Lorde, but abhorred my counsell, and despised my correction. Then shall it be too late to knocke, when the doore shall be shutte, and too late to crie for mercie, when it is the time of iustice. O terrible voyce of most iust iudgement, which shall be pronounced upon them, when it shall be said unto them, Go yee cursed into the fire euerlasting, which is prepared for the deuill and his angels.³⁶

The Order for the Burial of the Dead in *The Book of Common Prayer* did not, until the revisions of 1662, contain the prohibition against using the Office 'for any that die unbaptized, or excommunicate, or have laid violent hands

³³ Willymat, *Physicke*, sig. A2v.

³⁴ Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, p. 307.

³⁵ Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, p. 180.

³⁶ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1588 edn, p. 308, at: <http://ia700307.us.archive.org/2/items/bookofcommonprayer00chur/bookofcommonprayer00chur.pdf> (accessed 9 September 2013).

upon themselves'.³⁷ Nonetheless, as Brian Cummings observes, the 'refusal to bury the excommunicated had been explicit in medieval canon law and applied throughout the history of the BCP'.³⁸ According to the *Canons* of 1604, a minister was not permitted to bury a body if the 'deceased were denounced ... for some grievous and notorious Crime', and to do so would result in suspension from the ministry 'by the space of Three Months'.³⁹

Alongside the injunctions of the Church, aspects of folklore and superstition were also intrinsic to burial customs. Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy refer to the 'macabre ceremony' whereby the naked corpse of the suicide was thrown into a pit at a crossroads, and a wooden stake 'hammered through the body, pinioning it in the grave'.⁴⁰ According to Clare Gittings, a crossroads was chosen 'in order to diffuse the evil influence of the body in several different directions, thus rendering it less harmful',⁴¹ for the 'ghosts of suicides were believed to be restless and malevolent'.⁴² MacDonald and Murphy suggest that the stake 'may have come in time to serve as a means of preventing the resurrection of the suicide's body at the Last Judgement'.⁴³ Catherine Stevens comments on the frequency with which the lack of burial generates the apparent return of the dead; Young Bateman's return emphasizes both the problematic nature of burial and the difficulty of ensuring that the dead remain separated from the living.⁴⁴

In the play, such precautionary measures prove unsuccessful, and Young Bateman returns despite his father's assurance to Anne that 'I nail'd him to the Earth / Riveted a stake quite through his bosome'.⁴⁵ Anne laments to Ursula that she is being haunted by an eerily persistent ghost: 'It will not let me rest sleepe, nor eat, / The barricoded doores and ironlocks / No sooner shut but like a new

³⁷ Quoted in Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 171–2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 782.

³⁹ *Constitutions, and Canons Ecclesiastical*, No. LXVIII, London, 1604, Anglican.net, at: <http://www.anglican.net/doctrines/1604-canon-law/> (accessed 10 September 2013).

⁴⁰ Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, eds, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England*, Oxford Studies in Social History (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 15.

⁴¹ Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 73.

⁴² Michael MacDonald, 'Introduction', in Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, p. xix.

⁴³ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 44–5.

⁴⁴ On this point see Catherine Stevens' essay at Chapter 6 of this volume.

⁴⁵ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Tertius, sig. G1v.

clasp'd booke / Their leavy hindges streighway fall asunder, / And it gets in ...⁴⁶ She describes the Ghost's 'sighes, and heavy groanes / As if a sensible hart had broke in twaine', and she warns lovers to 'Take heede of vowes, and protestations / Which wantonly in dalliances you make, / The eie of Heaven is on you, and your oaths / Are registred; which if you breake, blesse me.'⁴⁷ Anne's ostensible moral failing in breaking her vow, despite the factor of parental pressure, invokes supernatural consequences.⁴⁸

Anne's father complains to Ursula that Young Bateman's father 'hath arrested me / Vpon an action of a thousand poundes / A precontract betwixt his son, and thee / To bed my wench'.⁴⁹ While the two fathers are ultimately reconciled and the legal obligation possibly overlooked, the enormous sum associated with the broken vow indicates the seriousness of failing to honour the agreement. Although the legal and financial ramifications of the broken contract do not directly affect Anne, the consequences of her choice are likewise experienced in a secular context – or, at least, from an indeterminate place within the community, whereby she is positioned uneasily between the living and the dead. As a result of Young Bateman's uncanny return, Anne's vow is subverted; the words she had originally spoken aloud seem to acquire a reversed incantatory power, forming a demonic compact with her lover, a twisted parody of the original agreement. The breaking of the original vow – both sacred and secular – thus permits an influx of the supernatural into the world of the living; at the same time, it invests in Young Bateman the power to enforce the 'new' contract, sealing Anne's fate after death.

Suicide and the Underworld

Like the spirit of Hamlet's father, the Ghost of Young Bateman hints at a fearful posthumous existence, a description of which would be too terrifying for mortal ears. Indeed, several of his ghostly speeches echo lines from *Hamlet*, but Young Bateman is less ambiguous a figure, appearing as a 'goblin damned' rather than a 'spirit of health'.⁵⁰ The distressed and weeping Anne is the only character who

⁴⁶ Ibid., sig. E4r.

⁴⁷ Ibid., sigs E4r–F1r.

⁴⁸ For another example of the link between moral failings and supernatural intervention, see the essay by Victoria Bladen on *The Witch of Edmonton* at Chapter 4 of this volume.

⁴⁹ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Secundus, sig. E1r.

⁵⁰ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Anne Thompson and Neil Taylor, Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London: Thomson, 2006), 1.4.40.

can see him (as with Hamlet and Gertrude in the closet scene), although her father warns her not to believe what she sees:

If it be so, 'tis done by sorcery.
 The father has combined, with some witch,
 To vex thy quiet patience, and gaine credit,
 That he would haunt thee dead, as oft he said,
 Hell can put life into a senseles body,
 And raise it from the grave, and make it speake;
 Vse all the faculties alive it did,
 To work the Devill's hellish stratagems!⁵¹

Boote's reference to the Devil indicates that – unlike Old Bateman – he is thinking in Christian, rather than classical pagan, terms, and his concerns reflect the early modern belief that '[d]emons were clever, and ... were capable of insinuating themselves into human communities by pretending that they were souls in pain'.⁵² According to the Puritan divine Greenham, however, the despairing Christian – in failing to fully consider the fate of his soul in the hereafter – places himself in as perilous a position as the misguided pagan. Greenham laments the 'heathen men' who erroneously believed that 'death was the end of all miserie: the perswasion whereof made them ... to make an end of themselves, and hasten their own death; as Satan doth make many nowadaies to doe'; these unfortunates, he warns, are 'ignorant of the hels, which is a place of farre greater paines then any they can suffer in this world whatsoever'.⁵³ Young Bateman initially appears to choose suicide as a form of escape from his 'miserie', but his obsessiveness is not the least bit diminished by his first months spent in the Underworld; instead, he becomes increasingly destructive in his focus on Anne's transgression.

While Young Bateman's restless ghost recalls that of the senior Hamlet's spirit, the descriptions associated with Anne's suicide later in the play bear a clear resemblance to the ambiguous circumstances of Ophelia's death. While Young Bateman's implied damnation and subsequent banishment to a pagan underworld may be accepted as the unavoidable outcome of suicide, Anne's fate is rather more problematic. She has acted reprehensibly in her betrayal of Young Bateman, and this point is emphasized in 'The Illustration' that prefaces

⁵¹ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Tertius, sig. F1v.

⁵² Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, p. 209.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 238–9.

the play, with the admonition 'The Morrall is Maides should beware in choise, / And where they cannot love, divert their voice'. Moreover, this part of the text states clearly that 'Shee drownes herself (guilt plaies the murtherer.)'⁵⁴ Yet while Sampson begins by describing Anne's death as a suicide – and while there are, later on, definite indications that she has chosen, at least on some level, to die – the unresolved questions surrounding the circumstances of her death challenge the assumption that she has committed a straightforward act of self-murder.

Given her protestations of love and her grief as Young Bateman goes off to war at the opening of the play, Anne's later cruelty toward him is surprising, but her derisive laughter on learning of his death seems to indicate that Sampson is deliberately – if clumsily – discouraging audience sympathy towards her.⁵⁵ From one perspective, Anne's inconstancy is perceived as predictable and inevitable, and attributed to her simply because she is a woman. Her companion Ursula repeatedly reminds the audience that women are fickle: 'fie upon us weather-cocks, of all things sublunary the worst of creatures, we painted sepulchers, rotten braveries, silly Ciphers until mens figures supply us'.⁵⁶ On another level, Anne's erratic conduct appears to justify, at least within the world of the play, Young Bateman's extreme behaviour as a ghost which – more problematically still – ultimately leads to her own death, despite her genuine regret after being visited by the ghost.

Anne is isolated in her remorse, both because of her guilt and because the Ghost makes itself visible only to her: 'See how like a dreadfull magistrate it standes, / Still pointing at me the blacke offender'.⁵⁷ Like the ghost of the murdered Banquo appearing only before Macbeth, the purpose of the visitation is to stimulate remorse and perhaps to prompt a clear confession of guilt before a handful of witnesses. When Anne sees the Ghost of Young Bateman she does at least confess to an 'inward sorrow', claiming, 'My *Genius* tells me, I shall have no rest / Till I have made contrition'.⁵⁸ She goes to visit Old Bateman to see if he, too, has received similar visitations, and Ursula defends her against his hostility:

Good sir remember,
Forgivenes is an Atribute of Heaven.
She has a hartie sorrow for her sinnes,
And comes to make attonement, if you please.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, 'The Illustration', sigs A1v–A2r.

⁵⁵ Ibid., Actus Secundus, sig. E3r.

⁵⁶ Ibid., sig. D2.

⁵⁷ Ibid., Actus Tertius, sig. F1v.

⁵⁸ Ibid. sigs F1v–F2r.

⁵⁹ Ibid., sig. F4v.

Old Bateman assumes that Anne is mocking his grief and bluntly opines, 'Certes shee's madd.'⁶⁰ Yet he is also moved by her plight, and although he admits that he intended to hurl at her '[s]tings of dishonour, ignominies, reproaches, / And all the stocke of calumnies, and scorne,' he tells Anne that 'now my pity / Converts them into sorrow for thy sorrowes'.⁶¹

By a strange quirk of the supernatural – or through divine intervention – Anne has ample time in which to repent. Although the ghost of Young Bateman is intent upon revenge, he is unable to claim Anne immediately because she is pregnant with her new husband's child; he tells her, 'Thy time is not yet come; i'm now exild / I may not touch thee while thou art with chil'd'.⁶² This is a strange and seemingly contradictory circumstance: if the unborn child is protected by divine decree, then why is Anne permitted to be completely victimized by the demonic ghost? If the Christian framework of the play suggests that God's judgement will prevail, is it just for Anne to become the prey of Young Bateman when she demonstrates contrition for her earlier treatment of him? When the time arrives for Anne to give birth and for Young Bateman to return and take her with him to 'misty *Erebus* ... where *Rhadamant*, and sable *Aeacus* dwell',⁶³ the play itself uneasily brings together the Christian and pagan worlds inhabited by the living and the dead respectively, and the ambiguity of Anne's position becomes more pronounced.⁶⁴ As Stevens observes, to attempt to communicate with the dead in early modern England was doubly perilous, not only providing a channel through which the living could be led astray but also breaching the injunction to seek insights only from God's word. At the same time, such communications represented the dead as a source of forbidden insight, possessing knowledge that the living could not access.⁶⁵ Anne's connection with the Ghost places her in just such a perilous position, for both reasons; even before her death she is endangered by her lack of spiritual guidance and tainted by her capacity to glimpse a damned Christian soul. Moreover, her broken vow and subsequent 'suicide' ought to be considered as separate offences, yet the former appears to ensure that the latter is a foregone conclusion.

⁶⁰ Ibid., sig. G1r.

⁶¹ Ibid., sig. G1v.

⁶² Ibid., sig. F1v.

⁶³ Ibid., sig. F1r.

⁶⁴ In Greek mythology, Rhadamanthus and Aeacus, along with Minos, were judges of the dead in the Underworld, 'imposing punishments for misdeeds in life'. See *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, ed. M.C. Howatson and Ian Chilvers, Oxford Paperback Reference (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 7.

⁶⁵ See Catherine Stevens at Chapter 6 in this volume.

Anne's father expresses his concern about his daughter's state of mind during her pregnancy, worrying that '[s]he beares a Plurisie of greifes about her, / And much I feare the weakenes of her braine / Should draw her to some ominous exigent!'⁶⁶ Together with Old Bateman's conviction that she has been unbalanced by her (imagined) sightings of Young Bateman's ghost, this anxiety on Anne's behalf clearly suggests that she has become mentally unstable. Peter Marshall observes that melancholics 'were expected targets for the devil to insinuate himself upon', and this was 'a truism reflected in contemporary theories of suicide'.⁶⁷ Thus, Anne suffers from remorse and fear, intensified by the frightening prospect of what will happen when Young Bateman comes to claim her. In this sense – like Ophelia's madness expressed in songs and flowers – these scenes are set up as a context for her eventual fate. While Ophelia, in her 'mad' scenes, expresses a preoccupation with sexuality, Anne's sense of shame is no doubt exacerbated by the physicality of her pregnancy, the changed shape of her body signifying her shift in allegiance from Young Bateman to German.

When Anne has given birth she does not participate in the delighted cooing of her female attendants; she feels neither joy in, nor attachment to, her infant daughter. Her father suggests that singing lullabies will give her comfort and banish her 'distempers', but she replies: 'I might have taken comfort / In this pretty babe; now it is too late.'⁶⁸ She anxiously addresses the women, as she anticipates Young Bateman's arrival at any moment: 'I pray be vigilant, / For if you slumber, or shut your eie-lids, / You never shall behold my living corps.'⁶⁹ Anne's misgivings have been increased by a powerful dream, and before she describes her vision, she frames it as a form of prophecy: 'Pray marke me, and let my words be written / Within your minds, as in a manuscript, / That when it proves so, you may say I told it.'⁷⁰ Anne's issued warning is a crucial precursor to her death, and it recalls Sym's observation that an intended suicide may be signalled through the '*speeches* and *actions* of such persons immediately before the fact: which are some words of *threatning* or *fore-telling* something that may import so much ... which is a sufficient warning what he will do, if it be not seasonably prevented.'⁷¹

⁶⁶ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Tertius, sig. F2r.

⁶⁷ Peter Marshall, 'Deceptive Appearances: Ghosts and Reformers in Elizabethan and Jacobean England', in Helen Parish and William G. Naphy, eds, *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe*, Studies in Early Modern European History (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 188–208, at p. 197.

⁶⁸ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Quartus, sig. H1r.

⁶⁹ Ibid., sig. H1r.

⁷⁰ Ibid., sig. H1r.

⁷¹ Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, pp. 260–61.

Anne's dream of her own death clearly recalls that of Ophelia, and the length and amount of detail in her retelling of it indicates the extent to which it has affected her.⁷² The passage may be broken up into four parts, each of which has a distinctive focus. In the first lines, Anne walks by the river in the bleak winter season:

Methought I walk'd a long the verdant banks
Of fertill Trent, at an un-usuall time,
The winter quarter; when *Herbes*, and *Flowers*
Natures choisest braveries are dead.
When every saplesse Tree fad's at the roote;

Here, the scene is tinged by melancholy and underpinned by an awareness of death; the 'saplesse Tree' may recall the 'fruitlesse Tree' upon which Young Bateman hanged himself. In the next section, by contrast, a sudden miracle of growth appears:

Yet then, though contrary to nature,
Vpon those banks where foaming surges beate,
I gatherd *Flowers*, *Roses* red, and *Damaske*,
Love *Pauncies*, *Pincks*, and gentle *Daffadils*,
That seldom budds before the Spring time comes,
Daisies, *Cowslopps*, *Harebells*, *Marigoulds*,
But not one bending *Violet* to be seene.
My apron full I thought to passe away,
And make a Garland of these fragrancies;

Although she acknowledges this phenomenon as 'contrary to nature', the flowers appear to Anne as a sort of unexpected gift, and her naming of each flower suggests the joy with which she gathers these 'fragrancies.' The sense of the miraculous is intensified in the third part of the passage, in which Anne realizes that she is not alone:

Just as I turn'd, I spide a lovely person,
Whose countenance was full of splendancy
With such embellishings, as I may imagine
Better then name them; it bad me follow it,

⁷² For the full speech, see Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Quartus, sig. H1v.

Then me thought, it went upon the water,
As firmly as on land;

The nature of the unidentified figure is difficult to interpret – does its ability to walk on water suggest that it is Christ-like, or is this merely a devilish ruse to lure Anne to her death by making the figure *appear* to be ‘full of splendancy’? The final part of her speech suggests that she *knows* on an instinctive level that she should not trust it, for she ends by issuing a warning about the imminent danger in which she feels herself to be:

... I covetous
To parley with so sweet a frontis-peece
Leap'd into th'water, and so dround my selfe.
Pray watch me well this night; for if you sleepe,
I shall goe gather *Flowers*, and then youle weepe.

Within the dream, Anne is both the one who leaps into the water and the one who watches from the riverbank; she is situated between her two selves, the active and the passive, and clearly still feels that she has the opportunity to escape the fate that she has so vividly glimpsed – hence her injunction to the women to ‘watch me well’.

The ‘doubtful’ deaths of Anne and Ophelia both seem to be inevitable, and in neither of the scenarios do we know precisely what the troubled woman is thinking. The parallels are clear: the list of flowers recalls Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s ‘fantastic garlands’ made from ‘crowflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples’,⁷³ and just as Ophelia laments that the violets ‘withered all when my father died’,⁷⁴ so Anne reports that there was ‘not one bending *Violet* to be seene.’⁷⁵ Gertrude’s suspiciously polished account of Ophelia’s drowning seems to function as justification for the Christian burial of Ophelia’s body; it depicts Ophelia as distracted, distressed and unaware of her danger, and thus deliberately frames her death as an unfortunate accident. The ‘churlish priest’ with whom Laertes remonstrates at Ophelia’s interment assumes – as the gravedigger had pointed out earlier – that she has committed suicide, and he gives voice to the prevailing early modern attitude towards self-murder when he insists to Laertes that, were it not for ‘great command’, Ophelia ‘should in ground unsanctified

⁷³ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 4.7.166–7.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 4.5.177–8.

⁷⁵ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Quartus, sig. H1v.

been lodged / Till the last trumpet: for charitable prayers, / Flints and pebbles should be thrown on her'.⁷⁶

Sampson's allusions to Ophelia's death, then, draw attention to the similarly 'doubtful' nature of Anne's demise. Anne's precarious mental state is carefully commented upon, suggesting that she is not her usual self; just as Ophelia is grieved and disordered by the death of her father and her estrangement from Hamlet, so Anne appears to be unhinged by belated remorse for her treatment of Young Bateman and her experience of being haunted by his ghost. As Ophelia comes to inhabit her own interior reality, so too does Anne experience an alternative reality within her dream – which is, for her, more compelling and immediate than her actual circumstances. Greenham warns against dreams of evil, which 'shew some euill in the heart, either in some sinne already committed, or in some sinne which may bee shortly committed: if the dreame be terrible, it is good to auoide al the occasions of that euil, and to giue our selues to praier, & not to giue too great credite to dreames, least they weaken faith'.⁷⁷ Greenham's advice appears to be particularly pertinent in Anne's case, for her absorption in her dream suggests her acceptance of its reality and the likelihood of her succumbing to it. What is important in terms of suicide is the fact that Anne, already disordered in her mind, is unsure of how to interpret her own dream, and above all feels that she will be unable to resist the summons when the time comes. Despite her admission that she '[l]eap'd into th'water' and thereby drowned, in the context of the dream and its irresistible fascination for her, the fatal leap appears to be less a voluntary act than an indication that she is at the mercy of forces beyond her control.

The pull of the supernatural appears to work not merely upon Anne, but on Ursula as well. The women who have been attending Anne succumb to sleep after celebrating the occasion with wine, and, although she has not been drinking herself, Ursula says aloud that she has a 'heavy slough' over her eyelids: '*Somisdore* hath struck me, / I cannot wake, and must give way to rest'.⁷⁸ The moment they have all been overcome with sleep, Young Bateman arrives, determined that his victim will 'mong'st the furies finde just recompence'. He tells Anne that the 'Ferry-man' awaits them – 'The Chauntecleere summons my retreat, / Signing a period to my pilgrimage' – and promises:

I'll lead thee to the ever-flaming Furnace,
That like a Feaver fed by opposite meates,

⁷⁶ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.1.218–20.

⁷⁷ Greenham, *Works*, p. 17.

⁷⁸ Sampson, *Vow Breaker*, Actus Quartus, sig. H2r.

Engenders, and consumes it selfe with heate.
I'le peirce the Aire as with a thunder bolt,
And make thy passage free; make specede away
Thy broken contract, now thou goest to pay.⁷⁹

Anne cries out, in a confusion of despair and failing hope: 'Oh Helpe, succour: helpe! wives, cozens, Mid-wives, / Good Angels guard me, I goe, but cannot tell, / Whether my journey be, to Heaven or hell.'⁸⁰ She invokes Christian angels but is thrown into confusion by the Ghost's references to the ferryman and to Tartary; if her dream seemed to hold out the promise of a Christian paradise in response to her belated remorse, this is threatened in the last minutes of her life by the Ghost's clear association with pagan hell and his influence in framing her punishment.

Suicide and the Community

An important consideration in the context of early modern suicide was the verdict reached by a posthumous coroner's jury. A person pronounced sane was 'returned a *felo de se*, a felon of himself', while a person considered insane was 'proclaimed *non compos mentis*, not of sound mind'.⁸¹ In a *felo de se* case, the suicide's 'moveable goods ... were forfeited to the crown', entailing a potentially serious loss of property for the family, whereas a verdict of *non compos mentis* meant that the victim and family alike were 'spared both the secular and religious penalties'.⁸² Sym states that those who are 'destitute of *understanding*' are not guilty of self-murder, because they 'cannot judge *morally*, nor sometimes naturally, of their owne actions; *neither* are able rightly to direct them, in a *state* of that impotency of understanding'. He includes in this category 'a *child* without discretion, a naturall *foole*, a mad man in his mad fits, one in his sleepe; *or* in such fits or sicknesse as is accompanied with a *delirium* or phrensey'.⁸³ This qualifies the quotation cited earlier in this chapter; whereas Young Bateman had demonstrated a clear intention to commit suicide despite initial misgivings, Anne's desire to atone for her betrayal of Young Bateman cannot be directly equated with a desire to end her own life.

⁷⁹ Ibid., sig. H2v.

⁸⁰ Ibid., sig. H3r.

⁸¹ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, p. 16.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 15–16.

⁸³ Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, p. 172.

There are reasonable grounds for considering Anne *non compos mentis*; her dream may even be perceived as a form of delirium, brought on by both her chronic state of anxiety and the physical trauma of childbirth. From this perspective, Anne's damnation becomes even more problematic: despite the evidence that she has repented her actions, not only is divine forgiveness withheld from her but also pity for the obvious disturbance of her mind. She is utterly possessed by Young Bateman, and the spectator is given the impression that, just as Don Andrea's enemies must suffer perpetual punishment in a pagan afterlife, so Anne will never quite be able to atone for her betrayal of Young Bateman. She is doubly doomed: first by the broken vow in the secular world, and, second, by the circumstances of her death. Both transgressions are, in the context of the play, unforgiveable.

The shift from a Christian to a pagan framework is not remarkable, but the implications in terms of the early modern attitude toward suicide are possibly unresolvable. On one level, it is likely that Sampson was simply not concerned with the contradictions in the play; the concept of the demon lover returning to possess his beloved is inherently theatrical and obviously possessed popular appeal for audiences. Marshall writes: '[a]s *The Vow Breaker* reminds us, ghosts in Reformation England were not just a topic of theological discourse, or an occasional and exceptional facet of genuine experience. They were also a cultural type affording the opportunity for imaginative representation.'⁸⁴ From the literary perspective, then, the echoes of *Hamlet* function as a form of homage to Shakespeare but are not necessarily meant to imply an engagement with the theological issues associated with the ghost of Hamlet's father. Indeed, what is notable in *The Vow Breaker* is the essentially secular context in which the deaths occur.

Although characters do express concern about Young Bateman's and Anne's emotional suffering, the community within the play is noticeably secular in its outlook. Old Bateman's statement about having staked his son's body after death indicates that the 'rules' and traditions surrounding suicide are operative in this community, but it is significant that the Young Bateman plot contains no character that is a representative of the Church, particularly following each suicide. The absence of a clerical presence at significant moments in the drama implies a form of challenge to the authority of the Church, and this secularized context has implications both within the play and in terms of the particular time at which Sampson produced it. Given the emotional turmoil experienced by Young Bateman and Anne there is a curious failure on the part of the community to try

⁸⁴ Marshall, 'Deceptive Appearances', p. 202.

to prevent the deaths from occurring. Young Bateman's family and neighbours are aware of his distress over Anne's infidelity, but nobody suggests that he seek solace in, or guidance from, the Church. Similarly, although Anne clearly articulates her fears and directly requests that she be watched over and protected from harm, not only are her companions more interested in merry-making than in holding a vigil at her bedside, but the rapidity with which the women are overcome with sleep seems to imply a further intrusion of supernatural forces – perhaps influenced by Young Bateman – to ensure Anne's isolation. Like her sightings of the Ghost, Anne's anxieties are perceived as the frantic workings of a febrile mind; her concerns are largely dismissed, perhaps because nobody has ocular proof of the Ghost's existence. One might expect – having witnessed the consequences of Young Bateman's devastation – that someone in the community would ensure that Anne was provided with spiritual guidance in response to her obvious distress following Young Bateman's suicide. Even if she is considered mad, this in itself should act as a warning signal, yet nobody appears to recognize the extremity of the danger to which Anne's soul has been exposed.

The community's failure to pay sufficient attention to matters of theological importance permits a frightening intrusion of the supernatural, in the form of Young Bateman's malevolent ghost. While on one level this challenges the authority of the Church, it also represents a surrender of power to the subterranean forces of corruption represented by the pagan otherworld. If Young Bateman has been perpetually damned for choosing to take his own life, this is difficult to reconcile with the power he possesses to directly influence Anne's fate, particularly when she exhibits remorse and repentance for breaking their vow. Marshall suggests that ghosts in early modern England 'might be subsumed into [the] mind-set of providentialism', whereby they are perceived as being 'directly employed to execute the judgements of God'.⁸⁵ If the Ghost of Young Bateman becomes an agent of divine Providence – as Atkinson suggests he does in the ballad versions of the story – the fact remains that the drama is played out within a secularized community that fails to fully comprehend the nature of what is happening.⁸⁶

The secular emphasis of *The Vow Breaker* may also be a product of social change, a shift in attitudes on the question of suicide. Lisa Lieberman writes that there was a period of increased intolerance toward self-murder, beginning around the mid-sixteenth century and lasting for roughly a hundred years.⁸⁷ MacDonald and

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 199.

⁸⁶ Atkinson, 'Marriage and Retribution', p. 604.

⁸⁷ Lisa Lieberman, *Leaving You: The Cultural Meaning of Suicide* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), p. 13.

Murphy note that before 1500 suicide was 'seldom punished'; after about 1600 it was 'gradually secularized and decriminalized'.⁸⁸ Thus, while a combination of clerical condemnation, civil laws and cultural anxieties contributed to the prevailing attitude of harsh intolerance toward suicides, this position of inflexibility came to be tempered and challenged by more compassionate views. Jeffrey R. Watt observes that 'magistrates became more reluctant' to pass strict sentence upon suicides, and suggests that Londoners 'showed a certain leniency toward voluntary death that anticipated by generations the changing opinions on suicide that would eventually spread through England'.⁸⁹ John Donne's *Biathanatos*, which Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin describe as 'one of the most perceptive and most wholly original accounts of suicide to be written in the entire history of the debate', was evidently completed in 1608, but not printed until 1644.⁹⁰ *The Vow Breaker* appeared only eight years before Donne's text, suggesting that both works were produced during a period in which perceptions of suicide were beginning to change.

From a literary perspective, the orthodox Christian position was undermined by famous classical examples of suicide, in which issues of personal honour and integrity as motivating factors for dying offered an alternative to the Christian insistence on the soul. Sampson's play is a product of its time in this sense; he is clearly indebted to Shakespeare and to the conventions of revenge tragedy. As Marshall points out, '[m]any dramatists who employed ghosts did not unduly agonise over their precise ontological status, or they evaded sensitive theological issues by rationalising them as spirits from Hades in the Senecan tradition'.⁹¹ Sampson may have been making precisely this sort of evasion, demonstrating a greater interest in the entertainment value of supernatural spectacle. Although the Young Bateman story itself is a simple narrative of thwarted desire and an obsessive quest for revenge – without the complexity and metatheatricity of revenge plays by dramatists such as Kyd, Middleton and Webster – *The Vow Breaker* does have clear links to the London theatres of the 1590s and the first decade of the seventeenth century, particularly in its elements of sensationalism. While audiences may have been fascinated by the theatrical representation of emotions so extreme as to be undiminished even by death, the interrelationship

⁸⁸ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, p. 16.

⁸⁹ Jeffrey R. Watt, 'Introduction: Toward a History of Suicide in Early Modern Europe', in Jeffrey R. Watt, ed., *From Sin to Insanity: Suicide in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 4–5.

⁹⁰ Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin, 'Introduction', in John Donne, *Biathanatos*, Garland English Texts 1 (New York: Garland, 1982), p. ix.

⁹¹ Marshall, 'Deceptive Appearances', p. 202.

of suicide and the supernatural in this play is ultimately unsettling. As the Ghost of Young Bateman and the remorseful Anne make their untimely exits from the stage, their shared destiny raises uneasy questions about the fate of the suicidal soul and the nature of God's forgiveness – questions that are not finally answered.